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TOP SECRET
MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
September 6, 1963, 10:30 AM -- Subject: Vietnam

Others present: Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Attorney General, Director Murrow, General Taylor, General Krulak, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Ambassador Nolting, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Helms, Mr. Colby, Mr. Bundy, Mr. Bromley Smith

The meeting began without the President.

Secretary Rusk said that if the situation continues to deteriorate in Vietnam, if our relations with Diem continue to deteriorate, and if U.S. domestic opinion becomes strongly anti-Diem, we will be faced with no alternative short of a massive U.S. military effort. We should direct Ambassador Lodge to tell Diem:

1. That we can foresee a condemnatory resolution in the UN within the next ten days. We will not be in the position to keep this anti-Diem resolution from being passed. Madame Nhu's appearance at the UN would be disastrous.

2. Unless Diem acts promptly, there will be a drastic effect in the U.S. involving both reduction in economic and military assistance and strong pressure to withdraw U.S. political support of Vietnam. He noted that we have not yet used the Lodge/Diem channel. Our urgent task is to gather all the evidence we can on the situation in Vietnam and the effect of recent events on the military effort against the Viet Cong.

Secretary McNamara suggested that we direct General Harkins to see Defense Minister Thuan and get his current views. He may no longer be saying, as he was last week, that Nhu has to go. We also need a military evaluation of what is happening in Vietnam.

Ambassador Nolting suggested that we ask Ambassador Lodge to see Vice President Tho who will have an excellent feel for what effect the recent events have had on the Vietnamese military effort.

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By MMK NARA, Date 6/19/95

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There followed a discussion of a statement appearing in the press allegedly quoting General Harkins as saying that recent events had reduced by 50% the Vietnamese military effort. General Krulak said General Harkins had consistently reported that the military effort had been affected but not seriously. An effort was being made to find out whether General Harkins had been misquoted. (It later developed that the reporter had misrepresented General Harkins' view which continued to be that the effect on the anti-Viet Cong operations had been limited.

The Attorney General asked whether we could win the war with Nhu and Diem. Secretary Rusk replied that the answer was no, if the Nhus remained in power and continued along the same lines they have been following. However, the Nhus may change their line.

The Attorney General asked whether the Nhus would change now. He cited press stories saying that we can live with Diem and Nhu. Such stories are certainly read by Diem. The effect is to greatly reduce our bargaining power with Diem. We have to be tough. Ambassador Lodge has to do more than say our President is unhappy. We have to tell Diem that he must do the things we demand or we will have to cut down our effort as forced by the U.S. public.

Mr. Hilsman said he had already sent a cable asking Embassy Saigon how we could cut U.S. programs without hurting the war effort.

The Attorney General asked if we have concluded that we are going to lose with Diem, why do we not grasp the nettle now.

Secretary Rusk pointed out that Diem would not be relying on press reports for information as to U.S. views. Our actions should be taken in two or three bites. It is very serious to threaten to pull out of Vietnam. If the Viet Cong takes over in Vietnam we are in real trouble. Ambassador Lodge could discount press stories by talking about what has to be done to meet our demands, including the exile of Madame Nhu. On the basis of Ambassador Lodge's talk with Diem, we could then decide on our next move. At that time we might decide to issue an ultimatum.

Mr. Bundy agreed that this was not the moment of decision. When we say we can't win with Diem we are talking of a longer time period. He personally doubted that General Harkins had said that the war effort had fallen off by 50%. He thought we should find out what was on Thuan's mind.

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He recalled that Thuan's view that something must be done immediately if the war was to be won had triggered our action of last week end. He thought we should find out whether Thuan's view had changed during the past few days and in the light of the collapse of coup planning.

General Taylor recalled that three weeks ago we still believed that we could win the war with Diem. The Joint Chiefs of Staff shared that view. He asked whether recent events had changed our judgment.

The Attorney General again asked what we should do if we have concluded that we can't win with Diem. Secretary McNamara replied that we can't answer that question because we have insufficient information in Washington.

Secretary Rusk agreed that a reassessment was required. He then read a cable from Ambassador Lodge reporting most recent developments (attached).

Secretary McNamara said we were not asking a showdown with Diem now but a discussion of the current situation.

The Attorney General asked whether we could get the views promptly of U.S. officers working with Vietnamese military units. Secretary McNamara said we could ask General Harkins to do this today. General Taylor said we could get the grass roots military view and suggested that General Krulak go to Vietnam, returning the first of the week, to report on the views of the Vietnamese officers.

Secretary Rusk commented on a report by Marguerite Higgins who had visited the Vietnamese countryside. He thought that Saigon may be such a snake pit that the views of those in Saigon may not be representative. He felt a strong need to try and find out the realities of the situation.

Mr. Murrow said he could ask his station chief to find out the views of the 23 Vietnamese on the USIA payroll.

Secretary Rusk said that his son had received a personal letter from a junior Foreign Service Officer friend now in Vietnam reporting real promise in the war against the Viet Cong.

Secretary McNamara recommended that General Krulak go to Saigon and return Monday. He asked that we get views from British Ambassador Thompson who is in Saigon.

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Mr. Bundy said the crucial question is what are the components of a judgment as to whether we can win the war with Diem.

Secretary Rusk said we can live with the international aspects of the Diem government, but can we win in Vietnam? Can we contain criticism in the U.S.? Mr. Murrow asked that we not underestimate the harm being done to us internationally by our continued support of Diem. Secretary Rusk replied that if we win in Vietnam, the international aspect will come into line.

Returning to the instructions to Ambassador Lodge, Secretary Rusk said we should make clear that Ambassador Lodge's first substantive meeting with Diem should not be considered a showdown.

Ambassador Nolting urged that we do not use pressure on Diem. To do so, in his opinion, would produce an unfortunate reaction. He asked that we not talk to Diem about sanctions, but describe to him flatly the situation as we saw it.

Secretary Rusk described our present position as being stage one. There may be no stage two if we decide to pull out. If we pull out, we might tell Diem that we wish him well. Diem may be able to win the war without us, but this is unlikely. Prior to actually pulling out, we might want to consider promoting a coup.

The President entered the meeting at this point. Secretary Rusk summarized the earlier discussion and the draft instructions to Ambassador Lodge.

The President asked why our goal is to get Nhu out for six months. Is this realistic? Madame Nhu should go abroad but somehow she should be kept from making speeches.

Mr. Bundy asked what is the essential minimum of our demands. Secretary Rusk replied that if the Nhuses stay on their present course we will continue to lose ground.

The President said we should ask Diem to prohibit Madame Nhu from talking. We had a public relations task in the U.S. and worldwide in dealing with Madame Nhu. He asked Ambassador Nolting whether our minimum requirement was the removal of Nhu.

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Ambassador Nolting said that on balance he felt that Nhu would have to go. He believed that the departure of Nhu would mean a loss in Vietnam but a gain with U.S. public opinion. He acknowledged the choice was a very close one.

Mr. Bundy said that if Madame Nhu would leave we could live with Nhu remaining in Saigon. He asked again that we try to find out from Thuan whether he believes as he did two weeks ago that Nhu must go if the war is to be won.

Bromley Smith